# For Lawyer, Reviving L.A. Hospital Is Personal

**By Evan George**
Daily Journal Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES - When the 25-year-old Washington, D.C. lawyer arrived in a Mississippi town in 1969 to try its only doctor for segregated waiting rooms, she saw a slam dunk case. But when black patients who were barred from the plush "whites only" office refused to testify, Sylvia Drew Ivie had an epiphany.

"They would rather get the [medical] care - even if it was inferior care - than not get the care," Drew Ivie said. "That was an important lesson for me."

It was the first hard realization that her goal of busting the racial barriers to health care would prove steeper, and slower to reach, than the civil rights fights for equal access to education, employment and housing. Health care was different, Drew Ivie said, because "people knew what their priorities were. It was to stay alive and to stay well."

That's a mindset she has wrestled with for 40 years as a civil rights and health law specialist - much of that time spent in the gantlet of South Los Angeles, where residents today remain sicker and doctors scarcer than anywhere in Southern California. Meanwhile, the failure of South Los Angeles' only public hospital, Martin Luther King Jr./Drew Medical Center, has ignited a full-on crisis.

Now, Drew Ivie is taking on the Herculean and politically delicate task of trying to re-open King/Drew. Once a gem born from the ashes of the Watts Riots, the Martin Luther King Jr./Drew Medical Center entered a downward spiral of mismanagement more than a decade ago that frayed its mission and killed some of its patients.

The hospital had been a source of pride, jobs and nearby care for the community, and activists argued against its closure despite the deadly errors. After flopping a make-or-break inspection in 2006, the county severed ties with the medical school (it became known as King-Harbor Hospital), and when federal funding was finally pulled in 2007, the county was forced to shut the hospital entirely. Since then, residents have scattered to far-flung emergency rooms, straining a fragile system.

As chief of staff for newly elected County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, the former Los Angeles city councilman and state senator who pledged during a heated campaign to reopen the hospital, the weight of King/Drew's failure will fall to Drew Ivie. Starting this month, her experience will drive the county's Second District's efforts to revive a medical facility in South Los Angeles by 2010, as well as bolster the network of community health clinics that have picked up the slack in the meantime.

"Her viewpoint is, 'Get it done and to get it done well,'" Ridley-Thomas told the Daily Journal. "It is political will that will drive this. There is leadership now in place to see it through and to make it happen. It will happen."

South Los Angeles has 28 percent fewer medical facilities than the rest of the county, according to a recent study by Community Health Councils. And the area has only 11 pediatricians for every 100,000 children, compared with 193 for every 100,000 children in West Los Angeles.

"It's a fire," Drew Ivie said during an interview in the courtyard of the county Hall of Administration, where she made a case for quick action. "We're not going to study everything to death; everything has been studied."

But some at the Board of Supervisors said political will alone would not unlock the hospital's doors. And Medicare officials in San Francisco said the county's Department of Health Services would have to come up with an "adequate facility and adequate plan for running it" before federal funding would be restored. Jack Cheevers, a spokesman for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, also said the agency would have to perform a thorough inspection of certification. To meet those goals, the county would likely have to get a hospital up and running on local or state funds first, he said.

Drew Ivie also comes to the fight saddled with heavy emotional ties to the issue.

A daughter of the physician for whom the teaching hospital was partially named, she made saving the sinking institution a personal battle and a family obligation. That the hospital finally shuttered within weeks of her losing her own husband to a brain tumor made the tragedy that much more crippling. Friends say the loss brought Drew Ivie to a low point in her life that left her treading water. They also said they had no doubt she eventually would charge back into the fray.

"Sylvia is somebody, unlike some politicians, who actually understands her mistakes and learns from them," said Stan Price, a former director of the National Health Law Program who has worked with her for decades. "She knows what went wrong and why she wasn't successful."

Sylvia Drew was born in Washington, D.C. in 1944, the same year the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People awarded her father, Charles Drew, a medal for his work developing early blood banks for use during World War II. A Howard University professor, Drew had previously resigned his official post as a director of the American Red Cross to protest its policy of storing the blood of white and black donors separately. When Drew Ivie was 6 years old, her father died in a car accident in Tuskegee, Ala.

The 1950s in the nation's capital made for formative years. Drew attended a segregated elementary school and an integrated high school, before graduating from Vassar College. She earned her law degree from Howard University School of Law.

While many budding civil rights activists took cues from pastors, labor leaders and law scholars, she said she drew inspiration from an anatomy researcher, Dr. W. Montague Cobb. As editor of the National Medical Association Journal and an anthropologist interested in the study of race, Cobb focused on equality and health before the field of health law existed.

And it was Cobb who convinced Drew Ivie to attend the March on Washington. So when Martin Luther King Jr. boomed his "I Have a Dream" speech, she saw the rising movement largely through the eyes of the activist physician.

A few years later, Drew Ivie entered the fight for health care equality as a civil rights lawyer, joining the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in New York. Her first case, alleging fatal discrimination in a North Carolina hospital, was a gruesome one.

A father driving home late one night encountered a band of night riders who attacked his car. The white assailants shot him in the neck and throat. The man was taken to the nearest facility where surgeons treated his wound but refused to keep him overnight because he was black. Three days later he died of complications from his wounds.

Drew Ivie told a North Carolina jury that discrimination, not a bullet, had killed the man. But because no local doctors would testify about the protocol for treating neck wounds, the case was dismissed. "It was primitive times," Drew Ivie said.

She joined the U.S. Office for Civil Rights in the Department of Health & Human Services during the Carter administration. In 1974, Drew Ivie moved to Los Angeles to briefly serve as a deputy city attorney.

She said she counts her work handling poverty and civil rights law with the National Health Law Program in the city as among the most important of her career. Unlike other civil rights areas, she said, the lawsuits did not produce "big headlines" because the Constitution scarcely mentions a right to health or medical care. Instead, Drew Ivie helped create an strategic model of advocating for patients by "going after whoever was not providing care" to beneficiaries. She became executive director of the organization in 1977, a title she held for more than 10 years.

When she was asked to sit on the board of the Southern Christian Leadership Council of Greater Los Angeles in 1983, she met its young director, Ridley-Thomas. The two struck up a lasting working relationship as he moved to local and then state office.

By 1988, with the Reagan administration attempting to thwart class actions by attacking legal aid groups, Drew Ivie left her position for a very different assignment: to head up a small storefront health clinic at the intersection of Martin Luther King and Crenshaw boulevards.

As executive director of the To Help Everyone Clinic in South L.A., she confronted many of the same health disparities she had fought in litigation.

Stan Price, her predecessor at the National Health Law Program who also sat on the clinic's board of trustees, said Drew Ivie used her advocacy skills to improve health trends on the ground. With a staff of 100 doctors, nurses and case managers, the clinic now serves patients in 10 languages, partly due to Drew Ivie's insistence that it cater to a growing population of Asian and Latino residents.

Her work with the clinic tapered off by 2005, when the largest cloud hanging over South Los Angeles became its once celebrated hospital and the Charles Drew University Medical Center that trained its doctors. As losing federal funding over safety concerns grew likely, Drew Ivie served as project director of the Steering Committee on the Future of the King/Drew Medical Center. The group advised supervisors on how to clean up the hospital's act.

When the supervisors pulled the plug on the hospital, Drew Ivie said, she was stunned. "We really didn't think that would be permitted to happen by all of the people who understood how important it was to the community," she said. She said she blamed failed governance and poor communication between the medical staff and county leaders.

Now, her boss is the one county official most bent on reopening the decrepit facility within two years.

Many in county government have interpreted Drew Ivie's appointment as a shake-up to try to overcome crippling bureaucratic failures. Last week, Ridley-Thomas also announced his pick of attorney Yolanda Vera as his health deputy. Vera, a longtime health care advocate who helped sue the county over hospital bed cuts years ago, said she has worked closely with Drew Ivie in the past.

County Supervisor Gloria Molina, who has proposed more money for South Los Angeles clinics, welcomed the appointments. "The fact that he has chosen several well-respected people with health backgrounds to be on his senior staff team demonstrates that health care is a high priority for him," Molina said. "That's very encouraging."

Lawyers who know Drew Ivie said they were excited to work with her on issues around access to health care.

Elena Ackel, an attorney with the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, said she was not surprised by the choice and called it "good news" for legal advocates who typically tussle with county departments.

"It's a big responsibility. I didn't know if she was ready to get back in the center of conflict again," Ackel said. "She is, obviously."

Evan George
Staff Writer

*Los Angeles Daily Journal*
o:(213) 229-5329
c:(323) 877-8404